



Service-learning in India: Where social entrepreneurship and the public good intersect...or collide?

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Summary

This paper discusses the implications of a service-learning internship project situated within India's burgeoning nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector. Currently, 'social entrepreneurship' is a driving philosophy for NGO-based social service in India. This project is based at a large research-intensive Canadian university where six Master of Library and Information Science students are working with an NGO in the southern Indian city of Bangalore. The NGO is involved in developing community-based libraries in marginalized urban and rural areas of India.

The Indian public library system is generally in a state of disrepair and does not provide meaningful services to the masses (Bhattacharjee, 2002). Given the lack of effective state-funded library services, the Indian NGO sector is starting to play a larger role in developing community and public libraries for some of India's most marginalized populations. Over the past 20 years there has been a shift towards grassroots development agendas and in turn this has helped to focus agency from the bottom-up.

This focus on efficiency and market-based approaches for those at the bottom of the pyramid is termed as social entrepreneurship in the Indian NGO sector. The major idea behind this approach is the

stimulation of entrepreneurialism and markets at the lowest economic rungs of society – an effort described as “inclusive capitalism” (Prahalad, 2006, p. xiii).

At the heart of this paper is the question of how a university-based internship program that focuses on community libraries as a ‘public good’ can exist within the framework of a market-based NGO. As the students are doing this work, are they implicitly endorsing a social entrepreneurship model of social service and what challenges might students encounter while trying to reconcile the Western social welfare model of public library services with the Indian NGO-based approach?

International service-learning is not a simple affair of helping marginalized populations in a value neutral environment. Rather, a complex set of ideological factors is often at play, particularly in an age of deepening globalization. Service-learning should foster a theoretical, conceptual, and reflexive openness to new global realities, particularly in so-called ‘developing countries’.

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